



August 6, 2003

Mr. Donald Whitehead
Executive Director
National Coalition for the Homeless
1012 Fourteenth Street, NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005

Dear Mr. Whitehead:

I wanted to write to assure you that your recent letter sent with other organizations has arrived at my office. Your concerns are evident and important.

I knew already, of course, that we shared a common agenda. As our insignia indicates, the mission of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness is to ensure "A Home for Every American." The first Chair of the revitalized Council, HUD Secretary Mel Martinez, voiced that exact mission in a speech made shortly after the Council's first full meeting. And that mission has been clearly reaffirmed by HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson, the current Chair of the Council.

The concern of this Council is for every homeless person. The twenty federal departments and agencies who are members of the Council have committed themselves to working to end this national disgrace.

We have learned over the past decade that no one federal agency can meet the goal we commonly share, ending homelessness for every American.

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The work of the Council has been to ensure that every federal agency is at the table, making their resources more available and accessible to homeless people; that a renewed sensitivity would be apparent both in the creation of internal, intra-agency working groups on homelessness at a number of agencies, and also in recent funding announcements that have targeted homeless people with mainstream resources (the recent DOL and HUD NOFA as well as the new Notice of guidance regarding HOME funds are the two most current).

Who could deny that the roots of homelessness lie in the poverty of inadequate housing, healthcare, income, and individual decisions. Whether those roots are systemic or personal in origin, our efforts must seek practical opportunities in the current fiscal climate to mitigate the impact of these harsh realities. That's why the intra-agency groups at HUD, HHS, SSA, VA, and Labor are all examining their mainstream resources. That's why prevention of homelessness has been reemphasized in federal policy and investment. That's why this administration is committed to expanding the reach of public health insurance programs and facilities. And that's why the approach we are taking corresponds to a management agenda that is based on research, performance, and results.

Is our current effort getting the job done? No one deems it to be, either inside or outside this administration. The rolls of homelessness continue undiminished. But the efforts to create research driven, performance based, results oriented plans and initiatives offer hope of resources and structural adjustments in the future.

Admittedly, we have more work to do. Departments and agencies that have not been at the table of homelessness for a decade have in the past few years moved to a more collaborative and resource oriented role. We applaud their movement and recognize that more can be done with the mainstream and targeted resources in the federal budget. The increase of 9% for targeted homeless programs, including the new Samaritan Initiative, in the President's 2004 budget proposal signifies this increased commitment. But, as you know, the 1999 GAO Report specifically counseled the federal government effort to move toward the deeper mainstream resources. And we are.

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We also recognize that, just as one federal agency is inadequate to address homelessness, one level of government is insufficient. We are partnering with governors and states in calling for and facilitating the creation of state interagency councils on homelessness. Nearly thirty now exist across the country. Just as we are sensitizing federal departments and agencies to the resource needs of homeless people and calling on them to increase access to mainstream resources, we are asking the states to do the same. As you know we are in the process of offering a Policy Academy experience to every state to forward that purpose.

We are also partnering with county officials and mayors and communities and cities who so often are on the front line of homelessness. Urban, small city, suburban, and rural areas are all part of the focus and partnership in creating ten year plans to end homelessness. In addition to a number of cities which already have plans endorsed by mayors, including Indianapolis, Chicago, Memphis, Phoenix and Atlanta, many other cities and counties are in the planning process.

We are also partnering with community and faith-based groups locally, and national advocacy groups to move forward the agenda that will end homelessness for our poorest neighbors. Most important, perhaps, is the effort we are making out in the country to hear directly from homeless people. Wherever I've traveled, we have made a priority of hearing directly from homeless people. They are the customers of the Interagency Council. We need to hear their voice, and we do. Their request is clear – they want a place to live. That's why our investment is focusing increasingly on the provision of housing.

All these partnerships re-engage every level of government and the community in the response to homelessness. And through each level, resources are re-engaged in our strategy of prevention and intervention. These resources and others will need to be focused to accomplish the larger mission to which we jointly aspire. Needless to say, the efforts in states and cities also focus on the reengagement of the corporate, business, and philanthropic worlds on this issue. Their partnership, especially, has the potential to supplement significantly the total resources.

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Symbolizing the new partnerships have been a series of focus groups convened by the Council. City administrators, faith based organizations, innovative housing developers, and providers and researchers regarding family homelessness have all been convened in the past year. Our plans call for additional focus groups on youth and rural issues, as well as several more targeted to research and innovative strategies to reduce and end family homelessness.

We have, indeed, prioritized the lives of people experiencing chronic homelessness. In my twenty-three years of experience in the field, whether volunteering on a breadline, directing a city's homelessness response, working with African-American churches in responding to family homelessness, or co-creating and leading a statewide advocacy organization, those disabled and most at risk of death became a necessary priority for my work. You can be certain a priority on that population is consistent with my professional and personal experience.

We could undoubtedly engage in a text vs text, researcher vs researcher, endorser vs endorser debate on this initiative. You have named only a few of the sources of research and support for this initiative. Nor have you named endorsers of the initiative which include the Millennial Housing Commission, the US Conference of Mayors, and the National Association of Counties.

Our priority on chronic homelessness is not exclusive. We are eager for the research and data that will allow policy advances for other populations. We are engaged in encouraging such research. I assure you that the research will be collected and created and will impact policy in the coming year.

Just as people experiencing chronic homelessness became a priority in my past work, so did the lives of those families and children who were so often "nickel and dimed" into a state of homelessness. Research, policy, and resources are needed, there is no question, to respond to their plight. You can be certain that the Council will make more visible its prioritization for these families in the coming months and years.

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After all the rhetoric and research, the reality is that the chronic homelessness initiative, targeted to creating housing for disabled, long-term homeless people, is not the obstacle in addressing the homelessness of non-disabled individuals and families. Nor has the “chronic homelessness dialogue” separated “homelessness from poverty.” That separation came long before there was such an initiative, long before this administration was in office.

To imply or indicate that the chronic homelessness initiative is responsible for so many policy misdirections, most existing long before its inception, overstates reality and undermines substantive dialogue.

In reality, the chronic homelessness initiative has created political will in Washington and in states and cities across the country and promises to muster a **housing** solution for homelessness. Those are contributions – political will and housing – that we have all longed for and which will make a difference in the future as appropriate elements of the strategy to end **all** homelessness.

But I agree with what is implicit in your letter. Those of us who have dedicated our lives to this issue for years and decades are frustrated. Our collective efforts have not resulted in a realization of the vision we carry of a country without pervasive homelessness.

The Council is committed to that vision. To that end we will continue the chronic homelessness initiative just as we will continue to collect data and information and innovative practices regarding other populations of homeless people. As I have said many times, our work will follow an approach that begins with research – broad based and inclusive. That research will then inform the creation of policy which will constellate the resources to implement strategies to end homelessness. And those strategies – innovative and entrepreneurial - will be researched to ensure outcomes and accountability.

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The Council remains committed to its core mission – A Home for Every American. Achieving that end, which is shared by so many groups and individuals across our country, will be realized only in the larger partnership of governments, private sector, homeless people, community and faith-based organizations.

The limited resources of the homeless assistance programs are not the solution. Strategies without emphasis on prevention are not the solution. Rhetoric without research is not the solution. Accusations without evidence will not get us there. Dismissing the work of fellow advocates, supportive housing creators, and credible researchers responding to evolving knowledge about homelessness will not get us there. Mischaracterizing the intent of new policy initiatives will not get us there.

Partnerships, research, and increased resources will move us toward the solution. Our work in the Council is to encourage and facilitate each through intervention and prevention strategies.

Finally, I would like to reiterate a challenge I made to the national advocacy groups recently in Washington. The creation of “Advocacy Academies” modeled on the Policy Academies that federal agencies have supported would provide an additional focus on the deep mainstream resources that pass from the federal government to the states. Given the paucity of state and local resources targeted to homelessness, a fact also related to state and local advocacy, impacting on federal block grants and funding is essential in creating prevention and intervention resources. I know the role that effective state advocacy organizations can have in securing increased resources and steering mainstream resources to homeless people from both federal and state sources. Technical assistance from national advocacy groups to state coalitions in tracking these resources and advocating for their investment in the lives of homeless people would complement the work we are doing in Washington to ensure that state and county mainstream resources are more available and accessible.

There is no single solution, no “silver bullet,” no “one truth” on homelessness, save that the disgrace needs to be ended. Rather than allowing our dialogue to devolve into a contest between differing opinions, research, and perspectives, or the paralysis of partisanship or polarization, I prefer to extend the open hand of partnership to you in our common objective. We seek common ground on behalf of our poorest neighbors.

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I look forward to our continuing dialogue. And, most especially, I value our partnership in realizing the vision of ending homelessness for all of our neighbors.

Sincerely,

Philip F. Mangano
Executive Director

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